



Conversations: Great and Small

If you listen carefully, you can hear a conversation going on in the field of massage therapy. It started long ago and continues to this day. It is an ongoing discussion about the fundamental questions and issues in our profession. The dialogue focuses on important themes such as the nature of human beings, the meaning of health and well-being, the significance of touch, methods of healing, ethical behavior, the education of practitioners, and the elements of professionalism.

At different times and at different places, great thinkers have proposed answers to the fundamental questions. Some of their writings and teachings have had a significant impact on the direction and practices of our profession. They have contributed to the Great Conversation in Massage Therapy by responding to those who came before them, and by setting the stage for future dialogue.

During the Keynote Address at the Miami Beach Convention in November, I became aware that I was listening to a small part of the Great Conversation in Massage Therapy. Clyde Ford, DC, author of *Where Healing Waters Meet: Touching Mind & Emotion through the Body* (1989), was discussing important topics like the primal nature of touch, the use of touch as a therapeutic method, the emotional memory of the body, the therapeutic relationship and boundaries, scope of the practice and ethics. They are themes of universal importance in our field. It was obvious that the audience was drawn into this dialogue and recognized its importance in their everyday practices.

The Great Conversation is not just for educators, authors or philosophers. It is important to all practitioners who have chosen massage therapy as their life's work. Every day we plan our individual sessions, build our businesses, interact with clients and make numerous decisions based on our understanding and beliefs about the important themes listed above.

The conscious practice of massage therapy demands that we participate in this dialogue and become familiar with past and current viewpoints on important issues. But how can we listen to and participate in this conversation? Who is doing all the talking? And how do we sift through the information available to find truth?

This idea of a Great Conversation in Massage Therapy is borrowed from the Great Books of the Western World. This set of sixty books starts with Homer and includes important authors through the 20th Century in philosophy and religion, natural science, social science and imaginative literature. These books

can be read alone or can be discussed at Great Books Discussion Groups. The basic concept of the Great Books Program is that we can best understand the important issues of today in the context of what great minds have thought and written about those topics (e.g. democracy, freedom, nature, love) through the ages.

We also have a tradition of thought in massage therapy which may be traced through time in books and articles written throughout our history. Some of our earliest important writings have been found in the Western tradition in Greece with Galen, and the Eastern tradition in China. Just as a panel of scholars chose the Great Books of the Western World using specific criteria, we could identify the Great Writings in Massage Therapy. To develop that list would be an exciting and monumental project in itself.

To identify our Great Writings it would be helpful to first identify the Great Questions and Issues that we have faced as a profession. I suggested some of the important ones in the opening paragraph. The Great Writings would be chosen from the works of authors from both inside massage therapy and those in related fields who have addressed similar issues.

Some possibilities for our list may be found in the writings of people like Galen, Pehr Ling, A.T. Still, D.D. Palmer, George Taylor, Douglas Graham, and Mary MacMillan. In more recent times, we find James Cyriax, Randolph Stone, Eunice Ingham, Ida Rolf, Moshe Feldenkrais and Ashley Montagu.

Some of the writings we claim for our list may even be only tangentially related to massage therapy but may have had significant impact on our profession. A good example would be Newton's concept of matter and Einstein's insights into the nature of energy and matter.

A clearer understanding of the Great Conversation in Massage Therapy including the perennial nature of the questions and issues, may help dissolve some of the fragmentation in the field. Each discipline within the larger field (e.g. Swedish massage, polarity or shiatsu) can be viewed as a specific approach based on different answers to the same Great Questions that are being and have been addressed in the field as a whole over the years.

Although detailed study of the Great Conversation in Massage Therapy through history would require years of study and a scholarly bent in personality, every practitioner can become familiar with the Great Questions and Issues and especially those in the forefront today. Some perennial issues that have been highlighted recently include professional ethics (especially sexual

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ethics and boundaries), professionalism (e.g. national certification), and the increasing knowledge about the nature of human beings as body/mind organisms and as energetic beings.

You can participate in this dialogue through your own reading of old and new books on themes you find interesting. Some of my current favorites are *Touching* by Ashley Montagu (1978), *The Body of Life* by Thomas Hanna (1987), *Job's Body* by Deane Juhan (1987), *Emotional Anatomy* by Stanley Keleman (1985), and *Inner Bridges* by Fritz Frederick Smith (1986). In addition, the AMTA has made an effort to present speakers at National Conventions and Conferences who address some of the Great Questions and Issues with fresh insight, while the *Massage Therapy Journal* publishes related articles.

You can include yourself in the Great Conversation just by becoming aware of it and reading and listening to writers, teachers and thinkers. But beware. Not all that is written or spoken can stand the test of time for truth and usefulness. Thoughtful reading, study, and continued discussion are necessary to sort out the great truths from the great mistakes in thinking. So open your ears to conversations great and small and listen in on the Great Conversation in Massage Therapy.

Patricia J. Benjamin
National Director of Education
Chicago, Illinois

1. Hutchins, Robert M. *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education*. Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.